

Aging Happens: It's hard to find someone who may not know they're lost

By Ellen Waldman

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Contrary to the popular expression, sometimes those who wander ARE lost. Not too long ago, it happened here in Ashland. A person with dementia left a facility, wandered, got lost, and had a tragic demise. I know that everyone in this situation did their best and are extremely sorry that this happened.

Why can't we find people who wander due to dementias? Here are some reasons given by another professional in the field: "They will not respond to calling out their name. In fact, sometimes they will actually hide from the people because of paranoia; they're afraid that someone's after them. They may not even recognize their own name and just keep wandering and walking. So, it's not the same as looking for someone else. These folks often don't respond."

With 60 percent of those with dementia at risk for wandering and becoming lost, it's important to do some pre-planning. Andy Carle is an award-winning professor, Executive-in-Residence and Founding Director of the Program in Senior Housing Administration at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va. He states of those who are lost more than 72 hours, only 20 percent survive. This is a sobering thought. One study showed that the number-one cause of stress for caregivers of people with Alzheimer's and related dementias, is the fear of that person wandering off and becoming lost.

Here are some things to keep in mind as preventive approaches to avoiding this scenario:

- Create the safest environment possible. If the person lives at home, having an alarm on the doors will let you know if they are trying to leave. Keep in mind that only licensed dementia care/memory care facilities have locked entrances.
- When moving someone who has dementia to a new living situation, it's often helpful to have a familiar person stay the first couple of nights. People are often unsure of where they are and why they're there, and a familiar face means so much. If they have a caregiver, allow this person to spend time with them in this new environment, including overnight. It really helps with this transition. If this is not possible, be sure that the staff is willing to do frequent, even hourly, overnight checks the first few days, until you're sure the person has settled in. The statistics say it can take as long as 89 days for someone to fully acclimate to a new environment. So a few days of extra care in the beginning is a good investment.

In addition to these ideas, there are two programs that help with wandering as well.

The first is called the Safe Return program. "It activates a community support network when a person with dementia is reported lost or is found in the community. The network, including local Alzheimer Association chapters and law enforcement agencies, work to help reunite the person who wandered with the caregiver or a family member" (from the Alzheimer's Association Safe Return + Medical Alert website). The program has a 98% success rate. With this program you get a personalized medical ID with the MedicAlert + Safe Return 24/7 toll-free number, along with emergency response and family

notification service (medicalert.org/safereturn; 800-432-5278). The cost is \$55/year, and other programs are also available, so check it out.

The other service is more of a new product. I have never used them, but the reviews sound great. It's called the GPS SmartSole (gpsmartsole.com; 213-489-3019). They call it "GPS Wearable Wandering Assistive Technology" and it is cutting edge. The GPS SmartSole, charger and app sell for \$299.

Here's what I learned from a written interview with Patrick Bertagna (who actually invented it) of GTX Corp, the company that makes the GPS SmartSole. In part: "They were able to miniaturize it enough to fit inside of an insole. But, it allows you to then hide it on the person. You place it on a little static charging pad overnight, the same way you charge your cell phone. In the morning, when they get dressed, you slide it into their shoes." Basically, it tracks in real-time by GPS, and sends that to a central system that can report their location, if needed. The reason I think this is great is that many times, people do not want to wear things on their body. They take them off, forget them altogether or lose them. The one obstacle I see is that someone needs to be in charge of this daily task, and I know that many facilities will not be able to do this.

For everyone's sake, caregivers, family members, facilities, and most importantly, the person with this illness, please practice safety measures and avoid a tragedy.